



# **Catholic Faith, Life & Creed**

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## **Breaking Open the Word**

by Mary Birmingham

# **Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time A**





## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

**Dear Jesus,**

Help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.

Flood my soul with your spirit and life.

Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly  
that all my life may only be a radiance of you.

Shine through me,

And be so in me that every soul I come into contact with  
may feel your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus!

John Henry Cardinal Newman

**Catholic  
Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
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Breaking Open the  
Word worksheets  
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Faith, Life, & Creed*  
Doctrinal Sessions.

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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today Matthew's Jesus tells us that our discipleship must be like salt that never loses its flavor.
- ▶ Salt was a powerful symbol in the ancient church.
- ▶ Salt was believed to keep people away from the influences of evil and to keep them committed to their faithful discipleship.
- ▶ Salt was used in ancient baptismal rituals. St. Augustine referred to the salt used in the ancient rite of acceptance.
- ▶ Salt was believed to strengthen the gift of wisdom and preaching the word of God.
- ▶ Salt was also used in rituals of exorcism.
- ▶ Salt was given to catechumens in antiquity as a substitute for Eucharist as they waited for the day they could partake of the sacrament.
- ▶ The symbols of salt and light have survived through the ages as symbols that reflect God's intimate relationship with the human race.
- ▶ Today's liturgy is a clarion call to be salt and light out in the world—to let our light shine and never lose the intensity of flavor when it comes to our faithful discipleship.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

## First reading: Isaiah 58: 7-10

- ▶ Today's reading deals with the issue of fasting.
- ▶ Fasting was understood as a vehicle for gaining favor with God.
- ▶ Isaiah takes issue with those who used fasting as a means of showy, false piety.
- ▶ Isaiah challenged people to turn their energies toward helping the poor.
- ▶ When one confronts the hunger within due to abstinence, one is more open to encounter God's intimate union and presence.
- ▶ Fasting empties the body in order to fill it with the intimate love of God.
- ▶ Fasting always leads to outward action. If not, it runs the risk of self-aggrandizement and idolatry.
- ▶ God asks that our fasting lead us to take care of the poor, the marginalized, the widow and the orphan.
- ▶ The covenant God forged with the people of Israel was a reciprocal arrangement in which God would care and provide for his people and the people in turn would care and provide for those vulnerable among them.
- ▶ God gives the blueprint for the community he envisions—a community in which all people are treated with equal dignity from the poorest of the poor to the most

exalted among us.

- ▶ Such a community is a witness to the entire world of the presence of God within that community.
- ▶ A community so ordered in right relationship with God is a community that sets its light upon a hilltop for all to see—a light that dispels darkness for all people.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the lesson in this reading? How could this possibly be a word for us today?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your community that it is a light that dispels the darkness for all people?
- ▶ In what way are you a light for others?
- ▶ How do you feel about the statement that fasting empties the body in order to fill it with the intimate love of God? Have you ever felt so emptied that only the love of God could fill you up again?

## Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2: 1-5

- ▶ Paul reaches out from the grave to speak to every generation. He speaks to the foibles of the human heart. The issues facing his community are issues we continue to face each and every day in our own communities.
- ▶ Still the people of God struggle with petty rivalries, jealousies, animosity and rampant judgment against others.
- ▶ Christian communities are rife with groups and factions that think theirs is the only path to God—they have the only “brand” of Catholicism—if not a member of this group or that group one simply is not following a righteous path to God.
- ▶ “Communities that lack introspection run the risk of falling prey to their own ideologies.” (Mary Birmingham, *Word and Worship Workbook*, Paulist Press, 381.)
- ▶ When communities embrace the wisdom God intends for that community there is no place for petty human self righteous divisiveness.
- ▶ God’s wisdom is not the wisdom of mere mortals. It is often found in the most obscure of places (the cross—an instrument of torture—no less!)
- ▶ The cross was so defiling that the Romans refused to use it on their own citizens. It was a major stumbling block for Jews since not only was it the most degrading death a person could endure, it made a person ritually unclean before the Law of Moses. The spilling of blood rendered a person unclean. God would never use such an instrument! God would never allow a Jew to be so defiled. Yet God used

this tool of degradation and torture as an instrument of salvation.

- ▶ This instrument of capital punishment became the embodiment of God's wisdom.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group.

- ▶ In what way are the same concerns Paul expressed evident in the Christian community today?
- ▶ Put yourself in the place of the Jews. Imagine how difficult it would be to accept that the cross—an instrument of torture, degradation and ritual impurity would be the very instrument God would use to save the world. What does that teach us about God? How can you relate what it teaches us about God to our lives today?

## Gospel: Matthew 5: 13-16

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

## Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Salt is a powerful metaphor in today's Gospel. It was a sign of stability and hospitality.
- ▶ Salt was understood as a sign of the bond between those who shared a meal together.
- ▶ Salt was also a sign of the promises God made with the people of Israel. In 2 Chronicles the bond is referred to as a "covenant made in salt" (13:5). In other words, when God forges a covenant with his people it is an unbreakable bond.
- ▶ Jesus' use of the word salt no doubt hearkens back to the meaning found in Sacred Scriptures. Salt is a reminder of every disciple's covenant relationship with God—an unbreakable, stable, permanent, reciprocal relationship.
- ▶ Even though salt does not in fact lose its flavor, in biblical times it could become ritually impure necessitating that it be discarded.
- ▶ Salt in that context was understood as God's judgment.
- ▶ In a similar vein, when or if disciples were to become complacent and flat—when and if they too "lose their flavor" and break the reciprocal covenant bond with God, they too will be subject to divine retribution and judgment.
- ▶ Disciples are to "become" salt—the salt of stability and hospitality as they take the

message of Christ out into the world.

- ▶ Light is another metaphor in today's Gospel.
- ▶ Light is an easier metaphor to grasp.
- ▶ Disciples are to be the light of Christ in the world. They are to illumine places where darkness resides. By their example, disciples are to light the way for others to follow in the path of Christ.
- ▶ Disciples are to shine their light brightly just as the light shines on a hill to brighten the sky and illuminate the city.
- ▶ Disciples are called to be light for others. In so doing, they also become light for themselves. The metaphor of light has a missionary thrust. The light is not only for one group's personal edification. Light is intended to illuminate the entire world.
- ▶ The intended "you" of this gospel is plural. This is not a message for one person—it is a message for the community.
- ▶ Matthew's Gospel is a challenge to the entire people of God—the Church. We as church are called to go out and be salt and light in the world.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is God calling you to be light and salt in your given world?
- ▶ Name some people in your life who have been salt and light for you. Describe the ways in which they have been that salt and light.
- ▶ What are some obstacles in your life that would keep you from being salt and light for others?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that god is in covenant, reciprocal relationship with you? What are God's responsibilities in this relationship? What are your responsibilities in this relationship?

### CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

## Appendix

One never knows how he or she will be called upon to be light and salt to the nations. As disciples we must be always ready to act. When working with and helping to prepare the funeral liturgy for a family who lost a loved one it became apparent that there were unresolved issues of hurt between the family and the Church.

It is so easy in such situations to say and do nothing, thinking it is none of one's business. This, however, was one time that I had the courage to be salt and light and helped become an agent of reconciliation in the midst of a very tense situation. God honored my efforts and the efforts of others involved to bring peace and reconciliation and as a result, two people were able to find their way back home to God.

We never know when we will be called upon to be a voice, a gentle, soothing, non-judgmental presence that brings the warmth and light of Christ to those who for one reason or another have been living in the dim light of darkness and often are not even aware that they are.

If we are called to be or do anything in this world it is to be an agent of Christ's healing, reconciling, merciful love.





## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Morality  
Moral Decision Making  
Prayer  
Life Issues  
Evangelization

Creed  
Revelation I or II  
Liturgical Year  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### MORALITY

Isaiah challenges those who exercise a showy demonstration of fasting. He insisted that righteousness involved living according to the covenant—caring for the poor, one another and God's creation as a sign of our love for God. God expects us to live according to the covenant. We do that by living a moral life. Paul reminds us to seek after God's wisdom that will enlighten and empower us to live the moral life. Jesus exhorts us not to lose the flavor—the salt we have been given—not to become “flat” in our response to Christ, the Gospel and the Kingdom. If we are to live the moral life we must understand the commitment we are making. It is thus important that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about morality.

### MORAL DECISION MAKING

Isaiah challenges those who exercise a showy demonstration of fasting. He insisted that righteousness involved living according to the covenant—caring for the poor, one another and God's creation as a sign of our love for God. God expects us to live according to the covenant. We do that by living a moral life. Paul reminds us to seek after God's wisdom that will enlighten and empower us to live the moral life. Jesus exhorts us not to lose the flavor—the salt we have been given—not to become “flat” in our response to Christ, the Gospel and the Kingdom. If we are to live the moral life we must understand the commitment we are making. How then do we know what is moral? How do we know how to make moral decisions? Today's doctrinal session will focus on MORAL DECISION MAKING.



## PRAYER

Isaiah challenges those who exercise a showy demonstration of fasting. He insisted that righteousness involved living according to the covenant—caring for the poor, one another and God’s creation as a sign of our love for God. God expects us to live according to the covenant. Paul reminds us to seek after God’s wisdom that will enlighten and empower us to live according to the new covenant in Christ. Jesus exhorts us not to lose the flavor—the salt we have been given—not to become “flat” in our response to Christ, the Gospel and the Kingdom. How exactly do we accomplish so great a task? A life of prayer. Period. Unless our lives are rooted in prayer, in ongoing reciprocal intimacy with God, we may fall into Isaiah’s warning of showy self-aggrandizement, will not have the wisdom Paul insisted we need, and we may indeed go “flat” in our response to Christ and the new covenant. Today’s liturgy therefore is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches us about PRAYER.

## CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Jesus upholds the dignity of all persons in the Sermon on the Mount. He gave us a blue print for the dignity and equality of the human family. The Sermon on the Mount gives us the theology that underpins our social mission in the Church today. It is thus a most appropriate occasion to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

## LIFE ISSUES

If we are to live according to the covenant God forged with Moses as Isaiah insists, if we are to possess the wisdom of God as Paul insists, and if we are to walk as children of the LIGHT as Jesus insists, then we must embrace the heart of the covenant. There can be no waffling. God entered into a covenant with the human race at the creation of the world. He created us all equal. He gave us the whole world and told us to be good stewards—to care for one another—all people, especially the poor. He created us with human dignity, mirrored in his own image. If we are to walk as children of the LIGHT then we must embrace LIFE for all people. We must embrace every person God creates. If we uphold every person’s equality and dignity in the eyes of God we must hold and uphold that all life is sacred—from womb to tomb. Thus today is an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about LIFE. Today’s doctrinal session will focus on LIFE ISSUES.

## EVANGELIZATION

Jesus tells us we are the light of the world and we are not to hide that light under a bushel basket. It is a call and a mandate to go out and proclaim the Good News to the world. It is thus a most appropriate occasion to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about EVANGELIZATION.

## CREED

The Sermon on the Mount presents us with a blueprint for living the moral life. The Sermon on the Mount is based on love and give us an insight into the heart of Jesus' love for us. Our response to the love Christ has demonstrated is to live the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount. When we live according to the righteousness contained therein we are strengthened to embrace the Christian life—to willingly die for the sake of the Gospel—to die for the sake of what we believe is righteous. St. Augustine told us that there are five things we must believe—the Sacraments, the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. Jesus gave us the law of love in the Sermon on the Mount. What beliefs then are we compelled to stake our life upon? The answer should be the CREED we profess in every Eucharistic liturgy. Thus today we will focus our attention on the CREED.

## REVELATION I or II

Every Sunday is an appropriate time to focus our attention on God's manifestation to the world through Sacred Scripture. In these early days of Jesus ministry, Jesus' primary thesis is to preach the kingdom. Matthew's primary thesis is to preach Jesus—the revelation of God. God speaks to us through his Word and reminds of us the God/human relationship since the beginning of time. Today's liturgy is an invitation to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about REVELATION.

## KINGDOM OF GOD

Jesus preached the kingdom and the evangelist Matthew preached Jesus. In today's Gospel Jesus teaches his disciples the blueprint for upright, moral living in the kingdom of God. Jesus teaches his followers what it means to be citizens in the reign he came to establish. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's great salvific enterprise that was to take place in the last age. Jesus inaugurates the fulfillment of that promise. Thus, it is a most appropriate to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

## LITURGICAL YEAR

In these early days of the liturgical year and Jesus' public ministry, it is a most appropriate time to address what we celebrate in the unfolding liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. It is thus most appropriate as the early days of the new liturgical year begin that we address what the Church teaches about the LITURGICAL YEAR.

## EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.